YOU ARE THE BODY
February 4, 2001
FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

John M. Buchanan

Our own happiness, our own peace, can never be complete until we find some way of sharing it with people who have no happiness and know no peace. Jesus calls us to shine this truth forth, live this truth forth. Be the light of the world, he says. Where there are dark places, be the light especially there. Be the salt of the earth. Bring out the true favor of what it is to be alive truly. Be truly alive. Be life – givers to others. That is what Jesus tells his disciples to be. That is what Jesus tells his Church, tells us, to be and do. Heal the sick, he says. Raise the dead. Cleanse lepers. Cast out demons. If the Church is doing things like that, then it is being what Jesus told it to be.

Frederick Buechner
The Clown in the Belfry

FOURTH
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Luke 5:1-11
1 Corinthians 12:12-16, 26-31
"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (1 Corinthians 12:27)

Startle us, O God, with your truth and remind us, once again, that you call us to be your people in the world, the body of your son, Jesus Christ. Give us strength, faith, and courage to be a faithful church and faithful disciples. Amen.

Some of us wage a private, lonely resistance movement against burgeoning electronic technology. Barbara Brown Taylor says it's an age thing: the dividing line is fifty. If you are under fifty you had to learn to negotiate the information highway. If you are over fifty you are so close to obsolescence there is no sense overloading your circuits. You're excused. (*Christian Century,* 11/1/00) There are, of course, many glorious exceptions, but part of it is that we never learned to type properly and consequently have been falling ever further behind with each new development in computer technology. I'm trying. Answering e-mails is tough going, time consuming, if you don't know how to type properly, if you haven't connected your brain to a keyboard. It is a burden we bear, proudly, as we become more and more obsolete.

I was thinking about that as I became entangled in a technological dysfunction in the Grant Park underground garage which could have been quickly and expeditiously remedied if only I could have found a human being to explain. You don't pay a person behind the glass in a booth any more. You pay a machine, a machine that takes your money, issues change and your validated ticket which when inserted in another machine allows you to leave the garage. The machine, the instructions told me, will also accept your credit card. What a good idea, I thought. So I followed instructions and as I walked to my car, felt a deep sense of accomplishment—until I inserted my parking ticket in the machine which promised to allow me to leave. The gate did not rise. I tried again and noticed a small screen with a message. "Please validate your ticket. Ticket invalid." Now there were two cars behind me waiting to get out. I tried again. No luck. Same message. So I left my car, asked the impatient drivers behind me to back up, which they did, and I headed back through the underground garage to the offending machine, which now bore a handwritten notice—"Not accepting credit cards." So I paid with cash and successfully negotiated my exit.

On my way home, I began to think about the daily functions we now perform electronically which used to be negotiated with another human being and what a change has happened in the way we live because of that development.

I'm not sure how we lived without cash machines, or electronic banking. But I used to know the tellers because every two weeks I made a deposit and we exchanged pleasantries and small talk about this and that, about children and weather.

It really wasn't so long ago that I knew by name the owner of the filling station who greeted me by name. Orville Gilliam, Elder in my church, who always checked my oil, scolded me for not paying attention to the condition of my tires, and in November not only filled my tank with ESSO, cleaned my windshield, but went into the back room to a freezer and came out with two pheasants he had bagged on a recent successful hunting venture. And Bill Versaw, owner of the Phillips 66 station, whose twin six year old boys always were there after school, and who, when an engine he was working on blew up in his face I called on in the hospital, and who I prayed with even though he hadn't darkened the door of a church for years and had no intention of doing so in the future.

I read recently that you can now slip through McDonald's without a human encounter, order electronically and pay with a swipe of a card.

And it spills over into religion, this familiar, efficient, relentless and sometimes jarring disembodiment of human life.

Studs Turkel has been asked to think out loud about what we now call spirituality and in a recent WFMT interview, noted the paradox that lots of people, maybe a majority of people, are interested in spirituality but not religion, think of themselves as spiritual persons but don't want anything to do with organized, institutional religion. It's an observation most of us are making these days. People say consistently to us, "I'm a very spiritual person. I just don't go to church."

In a recent issue of *CONTEXT,* Martin Marty quoted a college professor who has written a tongue-in-cheek piece about the First Church of Cyberspace:

> "One can listen to inspirational music and hymns, pick from a variety of sermon . . . look at art from the Vatican and Sistine Chapel in Gallery One and Rembrandt and Byzantine art in Gallery two, with options to link with other religious sites, discussion forums and reviews of religious books and movies . . . Cyberchurch provides greater value to the church shopper. Shoppers can stay as long as they wish and leave when they want."

And then the author, Randall Otto, becomes prophetic: "Virtual Christianity might possibly satisfy the technology icon himself, Bill Gates, who once said, "Just in terms of the allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on Sunday morning."

Marty quips, "This is a church that even Bill Gates could love." (See *CONTEXT,* Jan. 1, 2001)

A church without people, without bodies, a church without physical substance, physical presence. A church without touch and sight and feel and smell. An electronic church.

> "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ . . . . Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

That's what St. Paul said to and about the church, the little church in Corinth. His use of the body metaphor someone called a literary tour de force. Drawing on Greek philosophy, particularly the thought of Aristotle with which he was apparently familiar, Paul adopts a physical, political metaphor—a society as a body with many members, each having its specific and particular role to play, and applies it to this new creation, this community of people who have in common only their new belief in Jesus Christ. That new faith, that new intent to follow him, brings you into a new relationship with other believers and followers. You become a new creation in Christ. You have new relatives, new brothers and sisters and parents and children and aunts and uncles and grandparents. You are, whether you know it or not, whether you want to be or not, the Body of Christ, Christ's body in the world.

The letter Paul wrote to that contentious little community addressed their divisions and public arguments. He uses the body metaphor skillfully to describe the unity Christ gives the church and how the church is rendered ineffective when members fight and argue and are divided. But beneath it all is the radical notion of church as body, the provocative notion of the embodiment of religion, the essential and radical notion that this religion, this following Jesus Christ is essentially not private but corporate. Faith in Christ creates community, connection, relationship, or it misses something absolutely essential.

And something which confronts, contradicts and challenges the whole culturally popular notion that religion is essentially private spirituality, that Christian discipleship is walking in the garden, alone, with Jesus. This faith of ours is personal, of course, living deeply in our souls. But it is also embodied in the beloved community into which Jesus Christ calls us and places us, his body. And this faith of ours reminds us of the richness and beauty and riskiness and passion of life intersecting with other lives. This incarnate love of God in the human life of Jesus reminds us that our creator means for us to live in relationship.

George Lakoff, in *Resisting the Virtual Life,* writes:

> "The more you interact, not with something natural and alive, but with something electronic, it takes the sense of the earth away from you, robs you of more and more embodied experiences. That's a deep impoverishment of the human soul." (See *CONTEXT*, 1/1/01)

It is easy to let go of the notion of church as embodied. It is easier not to complicate your life with human relationships, to confine your spirituality to a private search for God, one on one. And when your church is urban and big it is almost irresistible. And so every

morning at 9:00, staff members gather for morning prayers and every morning, 6 or 8 names of members of the body are read and prayed for. We send each member a letter telling them that they will be prayed for and inviting specific prayer requests and it is amazing, in this fast-paced, busy, electronic world, how many people take the time to respond by telephone, or mail—and yes, e-mail, to thank Fourth Presbyterian Church for personalizing the Christian faith and saying, by the way, yes, I do have a concern—a worry that I'd like my church to know: my marriage, my health, my surgery, my father, my daughter, and yes, please pray for me and yes, I want you to help me thank God for the incredible joy of my new grandchild, my new job, my positive test results.

> "None of us," Barbara Wheeler says in a paper she wrote, "Who Needs Organized Religion?" "is strong enough to keep loving God in those dark nights of the soul, when it feels as if God doesn't care about our pain and may even be causing it . . . . Every believer at some time has felt abandoned by God.
> In such moments, when God is far away, and when our faith is weak or non-existent—in moments like these we need the church, all those other lovers of God who, in tough times, keep the faith for us."

And I thought of one of our members who died a few years ago of AIDS, who was here regularly and faithfully as long as he was able. I have told his story before. It is an important reminder: I keep a picture of him so I don't forget him, or what he said and taught me about the church—because even ministers sometimes wonder about it and are tempted to think that real religion is a private personal spirituality.

When he could no longer attend worship, he listened to the Sunday morning worship service on tape. Near the end he was in a hospice facility and he told me that it was hard to fall asleep at night. He was so sick and at night when all the guests and family had gone home, he felt alone with his pain and his weakness and the knowledge that he was dying. "You know what I do?" he said. "I get out my tape player and put on my ear phones and listen to the Sunday service. I must have a hundred tapes. It settles me down. Sometimes I fall asleep during the prelude or anthem and often during your sermon . . . but almost every night I go to sleep that way—here in bed, but also in my church."

St. Paul said, "If one member suffers, all suffer . . . ; if one member is honored, all rejoice . . . . Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."
Thanks be to God. Amen.